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Tending the Fire

Elizabeth A. City and Danique A. Dolly

Good leaders build their capacity to lead for equity, including openly addressing issues of injustice and race.

In April 2015, in the eerie silence before riots erupted in reaction to Freddie Gray, Jr.'s death, Danique, principal of Baltimore's City Neighbors High School (and coauthor of this article), felt as if his greatest fears as a school leader were coming to life before his eyes.

In reaction to an incident seen as unjust, anger and hatred were brewing and spreading throughout Baltimore. Danique wanted his school to be an oasis of peace within the city. But he now faced the reality that events beyond his control were unfolding in ways that would seriously affect the school and his students. A collective fury that would literally ignite the city was rising.

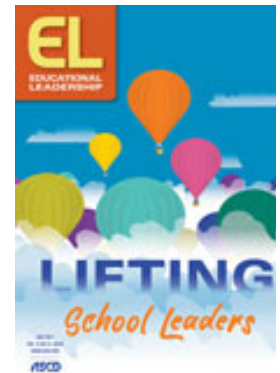
There were no fire drills or lockdown procedures to help Danique deal with the inflamed emotions in the air that spring day. Although he was able to ensure that all his students got home safely, he knew he'd have much more work to do once they returned. To know what to do during the days of the riots and beyond, Danique had to figure out what to pay attention to. Students and staff members would need healing and direction. They would need to become a community that would listen to and learn from one another—while continuing their planned academic work. Danique knew that to do those things successfully, he would have to face the fire—the fire of inequity in Baltimore and people's anger about it. He would have to keep the emotional flame surrounding this inequity under control without putting it out. That meant he'd have to lead the school in talking about injustice—and race

The Fire of Candid Discussion

Like many educators, we like to talk about race—sometimes. And frankly, sometimes we don't. We don't have much patience for talking about race without a purpose. But we don't have a lot of patience for *avoiding* talking about race if that avoidance gets in the way of learning.

School leaders need to create learning environments where all learners can bring their full selves to school. In our experience, that means making it possible for people to talk about the range of identities they hold, including racial identity. When a school community faces situations of injustice—around race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or other differences—the goal should be to not just discuss the matter, but also learn through it.

Opportunities for discussing equity and race should be respected and used like fire. They strengthen a school when used correctly, even when temperatures rise; but if mishandled or manipulated, they can burn our whole



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house down. We share here ways leaders can foster discussions about equity that are more like a candle in the dark than a wildfire.

Light the Flame with Students

One of the best ways to build your school's capacity around issues of equity is to start by tending the fire in students. When students are encouraged to talk and take action around subjects they care about, authentic learning happens. Many students feel inequities deeply and love to take them on. But first, you must be willing to allow such hot topics to enter the school's space constructively. All the ways you already gather students—homeroom/advisory, classrooms, community meetings, electives, and after-school clubs—offer opportunities to bring students together to discuss, share, and take action. Your staff may also have issues they care about deeply matching student and staff interests generates great energy. Here are some things you might promote as a leader:

- Write to the staff and school community (especially after an incident has taken place) about social justice issues. Encourage them to think about what you can do as a school community to respond to events.

- Create a social justice day for the school to take on topics as a community in a conference-style manner.

- Offer incentives for homerooms and school groups to create and share public service announcements with the community on issues of their concern.

- Work with the staff to develop various ways to positively allow students to express themselves.

When Danique provided forums for his students to discuss equity issues they felt strongly about, they rose to the challenge eagerly and creatively. Many students expressed their disgust at being called "thugs" during the Freddie Gray riots. Some wrote about this disrespect; others created songs to address it. When students learned about redlining in Baltimore (banks refusing to provide loans in certain neighborhoods), they created an exhibition of a model neighborhood with some areas "redlined" to help make others aware of the issue. Students who were distressed about the rising number of homicides in Baltimore put on a play to bring attention to the issue. Older students created a Best Buddy group to help younger special education students who were picked on. And when LGBT students began talking about how they felt unsafe, they formed a club to support and empower one another.

Danique made addressing issues, feelings, and concerns around race and injustice a priority. He believed his role was to question everyone about what could be done and to channel the many ideas into actions. Along with finding and creating the space for projects to develop, a lot of the leadership work was in making the community aware that the school promoted and encouraged *positive action*. He also valued bringing in different voices, perspectives, and resources from within and outside of the school community. Although he didn't have all the answers on what to do, Danique learned that through engaging empathetically with various community member students, and staff and being a part of discussions and idea sharing around injustice, he was strengthening his leadership.

Enter the Fire Yourself

As the not-quite-fearless leader of a school community, you must be willing to enter the fire by speaking up about issues of inequity and racism and sharing your own emotions. And you must find the balance within yourself between talking about injustices you're passionate about and making space for the variety of concerns and feelings your community has.

As a black man who had been stopped by the police himself, Danique knew deep down the feeling of helplessness racism can bring. He also knew that focusing only on his anger as a black man wouldn't help his staff and student community, which was a mixture of black, white, and Latino/a people with a wide range of experiences.

Danique felt more vulnerable as a leader when he pushed for discussions as a community around race than when he pushed for discussion around issues like gender equity or other differences. But his fear of going overboard or making an error because of his own experiences as a black man didn't stop him from tending to the hot topic. Not discussing the Freddie Gray tragedy would have been as bad as or worse than not discussing issues of school safety. He launched the discussion with these words:

I feel like I am at least two or three people right now. I am a black man who is pained by seeing images of black men being killed, I'm an angry man who is fed up but knows that pure rage won't get me anywhere because I'm a school principal and kids watch what I do and how I act or react. We have kids out there who may be feeling as angry and confused as myself or worse, and we have to be ready for them and figure out how we all will learn and grow from this situation.

Similarly, after the shooting of Keith Scott in September 2016 and subsequent riots in Charlotte, North Carolina, I (coauthor of this article) knew that as the white director of an education leadership program, saying nothing to his doctoral students wasn't an option. (More accurately, silence is always an option, but not always a good one, particularly for a white leader.) She wasn't sure exactly what to say. But her fear of going "underboard" or making an error as a white woman didn't stop her because she'd learned that silence can hurt more than words. Acknowledging that something is happening and opening the space for others to speak and listen, however imperfectly, is an important first step.

Build Diverse Relationships—and Practice

Another step toward building your capacity to lead for equity is forming relationships across lines of difference. The work of addressing equity issues is easier if you have rapport with colleagues across lines of difference (race, gender, language, religion, politics, and so on). You can be braver because you know certain people will tell you what they really think or where you're going astray, and you'll be able to hear them because you trust them.

It also helps to take an honest look at your strengths and limitations. Sometimes you can see these reflected in your school: If your school isn't good at something and you're the leader, that's probably a reflection of your weaker side (and vice versa). This is as true for equity issues as it is for more straightforward academic issues. It's important to realize, for instance, that being a person of color doesn't automatically mean you'll be skilled in leading for equity or building others' capacity to do so—although you've probably had more practice in talking about race than your white colleagues have. Similarly, being white doesn't automatically disqualify you—or exempt you. The many identities you bring to leadership will affect how you lead for equity. Sometimes who you are will make this easier; sometimes harder. Often it will be both.

Leadership is a practice, so once you've identified areas you need to work on—practice! At some point, Liz noticed she didn't hear many white people say the word *race*, and that when she said it, she had a physical reaction—her heart skipping beats, her speech going faster. So she practiced bringing up race in real conversations until she had no physical reactions. Danique realized he needed to understand how best to use his personal experiences while still giving others a voice, particularly because he led a predominantly white staff.

As a leader tackling sensitive issues, you also need to recognize your own needs. Ask for help from your network, telling people exactly what kind of help you need. Do you need assistance finding resources such as discussion protocols? Or just a shoulder to cry on to hold yourself steady? Discuss and face your own feelings, even your biases.

You don't have to be perfect. But you do have to be learning and leading.

Build Colleagues' Capacity

For some of us, it's easier to work directly with students or hold up the mirror to ourselves than to spend time and energy building the capacity of our colleagues. But other adults in the building will likely engage in more dialogue with students on equity issues than you will as school leader, so it's worth your investment to build their capacity. And when a community names truths, disagrees, and tries to really see and listen to one another, great learning happens.

We've found that when talking about equity—and race in particular—giving anyone the impression you think they're racist isn't the best place to start. Liz learned this when she talked with a colleague about an interaction the teacher had had with students that some students experienced as rude and others as racist. "No one likes to be called a racist," the teacher told Liz. Although Liz hadn't called her a racist, when she talked about the racially charged exchange, this teacher felt accused.

So where do you start? Remember that the skills you have for leading adult learning in general apply to fostering adult learning about equity. So start out the way you would if you were trying to build your staff's capacity about anything—by getting some sense of each individual's comfort level and skills in that area, realizing that the level of confidence and skills will vary across your community. You might have your colleagues identify their level of comfort and skill in discussing—and having students discuss—equity or race issues, having them reflect on questions like, How comfortable am I discussing topics related to (in)equity with students? What steps can I take to improve my comfort level? What skills can I bring to facilitating dialogue around this hot topic? What skills must I acquire to get better—and what steps can I take to acquire them?¹

Once you see where staff members fall, you'll see what each one needs most to build capacity. You might enlist those colleagues who demonstrate high confidence and skill levels as leaders in launching equity discussions. Those with skill in facilitating dialogue but low comfort with equity or race issues may need encouragement to give it a try. Colleagues with both low confidence and low skill might need some training, and they will certainly need lots of practice discussing equity issues in safe spaces and receiving feedback. The bottom line: It's worth noticing where each staff person is on this journey and helping him or her go farther.

Contending with Fire

As leaders in education seeking equity for all, our fight will never end. Each incident we face related to social justice, race, and inequity will be rooted in deeper fires that we didn't start, but which we must contend with as part of our world. Our role is to equip students to face that world. Danique's students, for instance, faced a situation in which buses often drove past black students without stopping. Several students wrote a letter to the bus company, requesting a meeting.

By helping students and colleagues control the fire of emotion surrounding inequity and use its energy constructively, we can prepare students for situations that will challenge them more than any math problem. We must build our own and others' capacity to learn through, to learn in spite of, to learn because of, and to learn with.

Endnote

¹ Resources for building comfort and skill include *Courageous Conversations about Race* by Glenn E. Singleton, *What Does It Mean to Be White?* by Robin DiAngelo, and the [Social Justice Training Institute](#).

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